

PART 23: CREATE A MAMMAL FRIENDLY

Watering hole

ALL ANIMALS NEED WATER, AND, IN HIGH SUMMER ESPECIALLY, A GARDEN POND WILL BE A BIG DRAW TO ALL KINDS OF WILDLIFE. READ ON FOR SOME PRACTICAL IDEAS ON CREATING THE PERFECT MAMMAL FRIENDLY POOL.

Building a pond is probably the single most effective way to boost the wildlife appeal of your garden or allotment. Water is essential to all life, and if it's in short supply, many of the animals that might otherwise visit or even settle down to live in your garden will have to go elsewhere.

A pond can be built to suit any size or shape of plot. Small pools can be built with minimal effort by sinking a preformed rigid liner, or even an old ceramic sink, into the ground. Line the hole with sand to help a rigid liner bed in. Slightly more labour-intensive, but much

better, is to use a flexible pond liner sheet to custom-build a perfect pond. Use sand and/or old carpets to line the hole and protect the sheet liner and prolong its life. Building a pond this way allows you to choose the ideal shape and to create shallow margins – an important feature of a good wildlife pond. Shallow water warms quickly in summer and is easier and safer for terrestrial animals to approach for drinking.

Emergency exit

Ideally your pond should have at least one gently sloping bank and a shallow lip all the way around.

Steep or over-hanging edges are disastrous to small animals in the water, since they make escape impossible. Even nimble creatures like frogs will struggle to exit a pond rimmed with overhanging paving slabs while, for a hedgehog, even moderately steep, slippery margins might be too much. If your pond has steepish sides, create an escape ramp with a shallow gradient and plenty of grip. A heap of pebbles does the trick, as will a log with one end secured in the water.

Use rocks or a small log pile and some naturalistic planting around the pond to create cover for small animals – they will be unhappy

about approaching the water over exposed ground.

There is room for a watering hole in even the tiniest garden. Garden centres are full of trendy 'water features' that take up next to no space, but which may still offer refreshment and bathing opportunities to wildlife. Follow the same rules when choosing and installing one of these as for large ponds (accessibility, cover, ease of escape). If musical waterfalls or Feng shui pebble-fountains don't suit your style or budget, you can create a fine mini-watering hole that wildlife will love by sinking a plastic dustbin lid or even a large saucer (the kind designed to go under big flowerpots) into the ground. The smaller your pool, the quicker it will dry out, so check it daily if possible and top up often, preferably with collected rainwater.

Who goes there

Another reason for having a shallow 'beach' at one side of the pond is that it creates an ideal situation for recording tracks. You can create the perfect canvas for even tiny feet to leave an impression using fine sand or by washing silty soil through a fine sieve (the kind normally used for flour in the kitchen) into a bucket. Let the fine material settle,



Hedgehogs are good swimmers, so a tumble into the water needn't be disastrous as long as there is a ramp or 'ladder' to help them scramble out.

then tip off the clean water and dry the resulting sludge. When it reaches the consistency of smooth peanut butter (easily spreadable but not soft), spread it by the pond and spray lightly with water to create a perfectly smooth surface before dusk falls one evening. Then go back the next few mornings to see who has visited in the night. In order to maintain a beach like this you'll have to do plenty of weeding – the tides and level changes that keep coastal or river beaches clean won't happen in the average pond!

Ice breakers

Many people fill bird baths to look after feathered visitors, but these are often inaccessible to mammals, so a pool at ground level is important too. In winter you need to work a little to keep both pools and bird baths ice free.

Many people use hot water to fill bird baths and water bowls in winter, the idea being that it will take longer to freeze. But strangely the reverse is sometimes true. In a rather puzzling phenomenon, the convection currents generated inside a bowl of hot water sometimes mean that ice will form on it faster than on the same volume of cold water. (If you don't believe it, do some research, it's known as the 'Mpemba Effect').

The best way to melt pond ice is with a warm object, such as a saucepan of hot water or a rubber hot water bottle, which you can lay on the ice near the pond edge where it will slowly melt through. Smashing ice creates shock waves which may be harmful to pondlife, and repeatedly removing it will reduce the water level in the pond. If your pond is popular with wildlife,

their movements will help keep it ice free, and a floating tennis ball will help if temperatures are just grazing zero. A more extreme solution for very cold winters is a water heater. These are often used in fancy bird baths and in ponds containing valuable koi carp. Most run on batteries or mains electricity, but there are solar-powered models available which may be more in keeping with the philosophy of the wildlife gardener. Floating heaters keep a small area ice free and should be deployed near the shallow pond edge. Submerged ones heat a larger volume of water and use more energy.

Keep it clean

If you have a large healthy pond, it will be self cleaning to a large extent, with most organic matter sinking over time and being bound up in the bottom matrix. Such ponds may only need cleaning every few years. Very small watering holes, especially those made from plastic dishes, need regular cleaning, because any contaminants are relatively concentrated and without plants to bind them will remain in the water. Give the whole thing a regular scrub and replace some or all of the water from time to time.

Having done all this, it's worth remembering that for most wild mammals to make use of the wonderful resource you've provided for them, they have to be able to access your garden. If your pond is surrounded by a fortress of tall panel fencing or walls, the best you can hope for is a visit from next-door's nimble cat. Ground level gaps in your garden boundaries are highways for thirsty wildlife – don't block them out!

The perfect wildlife pond

